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The Rhetoric of Artistic Ethics in Don DeLillo's Novels

Paula Martín Salván

1 In Don DeLillo's novel *Mao II* (1991) one of the characters tells the protagonist, the reclusive writer Bill Gray:

> You have a twisted sense of the writer's place in society. You think the writer belongs to the far margin, doing dangerous things. In Central America, writers carry guns. They have to. And this has always been your idea of the way it ought to be. The state should want to kill all writers. Every government, every group that holds power or aspires to power should feel so threatened by writers that they hunt them down, everywhere (97).

2 As is well known, the novel's plot was inspired by Salman Rushdie's experience after Ayatollah Khomeini issued the *fatwa* against him in 1989 (Passaro 77; Scanlan 229-230). This passage can be read as a concentrated version of DeLillo's discourse on the role of writers in society, as it has been expressed in a fragmentary way in his novels, nonfiction writings and public statements. According to it, a novelist's duty should be that of a lookout in charge of observing reality and denouncing its failures. The main threat for the contemporary novelist, according to DeLillo, would be to lose the distance from which he observes, to be assimilated by socio-economic and political structures. In a 1988 interview, DeLillo stated:

> There are so many temptations for American writers to become part of the system and part of the structure that now, more than ever, we have to resist. American writers ought to stand and live in the margins, and be more dangerous (DeLillo in Arensberg 45-46).

3 In this paper, I would like to sound the depth of that statement, analyzing DeLillo's narrative in terms of the artistic ethics built into it. This issue will be connected to the ongoing debate on postmodernism as a cultural movement and its capacity to work as a tool for critique in capitalist societies. I will focus primarily on *Mao II*, the novel in which DeLillo thematizes his ethical concerns about writers' duties in a most explicit way. Nevertheless, I will claim that the rhetorical language and narrative structures used to express that concern are recurrent in the rest of his narrative as well. Taking this into

account, I will propose the reconsideration of some elements of his work as alien to postmodernist aesthetics.

4 DeLillo's development as a writer in the last three decades runs parallel to the debate around the concept of postmodernism. According to the Jamesonian paradigm, one of the central issues in this debate has been postmodernism's questioned capacity to react against the capitalist power structures from which it was born. DeLillo's ideas about writing, power and the role of artists in society might be said to be framed by the same rhetorical devices used in postmodernist critical theory. For the sake of contextualization, I would like to sketch the main positions in this debate in terms that may be particularly relevant for the understanding of the case under analysis.

5 Fredric Jameson claimed in his seminal work *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that the success of the word "postmodernism" over other competing terms was directly related to its *portmanteau* quality (xiii). The semantic instability of the term has been related to its capacity to absorb all sorts of cultural manifestations.[1] This capacity plays a determinant role in the debate on whether postmodernism "is stigmatized as corrupt or, on the other hand, saluted as a culturally and aesthetically healthy and positive form of innovation" (Jameson 62). What is at stake here is the subversive capacity of postmodernism regarding the socio-economic model from which it springs.[2]

6 Moving on to the restricted field of literary criticism on Don DeLillo's work, the same debate is reproduced by different authors. Critics such as Frank Lentricchia, John N. Duvall, Philip Nel and Jeoffrey S. Bull have defended DeLillo's commitment to art as critique on different grounds, from the open political statement to the affiliation to anti-postmodernist aesthetics. Others, such as John Kucich or Gerald Howard, have used his work as illustration of the postmodernist writer's incapacity to commit in any way:

> most white male postmodern writers simply subscribe to that brand of postmodernism that believes contemporary art's lack of distance from the marketplace prevents it from claiming any special authority, or any means of making a difference in the social sphere (Kucich 329).

7 It should be noted that both defendants and detractors have built their arguments on a dialectic basis. Their consideration of postmodernism in connection to DeLillo's work tends to be framed by their implicit belief in modernism as the last cultural paradigm taking the opposition to the capitalist socio-economic system as its ultimate goal. This theoretical stance can be easily identified in the work of critics such as Frank Lentricchia, John N. Duvall or Philip Nel, and it can be related to Terry Eagleton's paradigm as expressed in *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. From this perspective, an effective critique of late capitalism is incompatible with postmodernist aesthetics. Therefore, if DeLillo's work is to be considered as ethically committed to that kind of critique, it follows that it needs to be considered as anti-postmodernist. As it will be seen, this position is implicitly endorsed by DeLillo's own statements about his work. Moreover, as I will try to illustrate, Lentricchia, Duvall and Nel repeatedly tend to associate this anti-postmodernism to a modernist aesthetics in their analysis of DeLillo's fiction.

8 For the past few years, DeLillo has deliberately tried to stress his distance from the postmodern marketplace in different ways. To begin with, he has rejected the label "postmodernist" in connection to his work:

> When people say *White Noise* is post-modern, I don't really complain. I don't say it myself. But I don't see *Underworld* as post-modern. Maybe it's the last modernist gasp. I don't know (DeLillo in Williams).

9 Moreover, his frequent statements on the role of the contemporary novelist insist on the issue of distance from the events he wants to portray:

> The writer is the person who stands outside society, independent of affiliation and independent of influence. The writer is the man or woman who automatically takes a stance against his or her government (DeLillo in Arensberg 45).

10 This view of his work seems to be confirmed by the recurrent critical description of it as an "anatomy of postmodernity."[3] The insistence on the semantic field of pathology through the use of metaphors taken from the language of medical and forensic sciences underlines the theoretical conception of postmodernity as a decadent or corrupted age.[4] This postlapsarian view of reality permeates DeLillo's fiction and his statements in defense of the writer's independence in the contemporary world. In *Mao II*, for instance, he writes: "Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture" (41). It may be claimed, moreover, that the "pathologist" metaphor allows for the conceptualization of an external position regarding the object under scrutiny. It makes it possible to adopt a position of resistance to postmodernism as a "diseased body" that needs to be analyzed. In a 1997 interview DeLillo claimed that

> the novel as an art form has moved to the margins and we cannot expect it to be anywhere else. From this sideline vantage, the novelist can assert an influence in a context that may be relatively narrow, but may be all the more forceful and incisive for this very reason (De Lillo in Bing 262).

11 According to this formulation, it is precisely by distancing himself from the postmodern world that DeLillo can offer a precise account of it.

12 In what follows, I will argue that such aspiration to "stand outside" works as the recurrent structural pattern in DeLillo's work.[5] DeLillo's will to be an outsider can be simultaneously analyzed along different fronts. In the first place, his explicit statements about this issue should be taken into account. This includes interviews and nonfiction writings, together with his participation in public acts such as the reading of pamphlets in defense of Salman Rushdie and Wei Jingsheng or the recent PEN Writers State of Emergency II event.[6] In the second place, the way in which his novels tend to thematize the issue of artistic ethics should be considered. Novels such as *Great Jones Street* (1973), *Mao II* (1991), *Underworld* (1997) or *The Body Artist* (2001) are populated by artists who confront the need to make an ethical choice in the course of their careers. Finally, narrative motives that do not fit into postmodernist schemata should be accounted for, including patterns of social withdrawal, different expressions of nostalgia and the recurrent rhetoric of revelation permeating some of his novels with mystical overtones.

13 DeLillo's explicit statements on the role of the novelist in the contemporary world, in the first place, need to be analyzed in detail. His position can be initially summarized as follows: there used to be a time when writers exerted a great influence on social and political issues ("years ago I thought..."), a position that is being lost as writers are incorporated into the mechanisms of capitalist world markets ("there are so many temptations...") and are thus becoming "part of the system" and of its harmless cultural logic. To recover their previous status, writers have to move out of that logic—"writers ought to stand and live in the margins"—in order to be able to observe reality from a "sideline vantage" point and to keep their capacity to denounce and criticize it: "to alter the inner life of the culture".

14 Taken literally, this view seems irreconcilable with the image of a writer who has sold thousands of books and who participates actively in the promotional mechanisms of the

publishing industry. The matter, however, cannot be taken so lightly. The question would be, in my view, what DeLillo exactly means when he claims that writers ought to "live in the margins." His growing involvement in "public affairs" seems to indicate that the reclusive position he used to share with authors such as Thomas Pynchon or J.D. Salinger is being progressively abandoned. I would rather interpret his claim in aesthetic and rhetorical terms.

15 The rhetorical frame on which DeLillo's ideas are built implies a peculiar spatial organization. It establishes a privileged location for the writer that is represented as being *almost* external to power structures but that grants its inhabitant the capacity to affect them from the border area. This spatial articulation can be easily identified in some of DeLillo's statements: "live in the margins and be more dangerous," "writers belong to the far margin," "the novel as an art form has moved to the margins." Living in the border areas of a system, DeLillo claims, turns the writer into a dangerous element for that system. This idea had its anthropological formulation in Mary Douglas' seminal book *Purity and Danger*: "All margins are dangerous [...]. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins" (Douglas 121). The idea of marginality in DeLillo's fiction, it should be pointed out, is closer to the Thoreauvian paradigm of retirement into the wilderness than to the Pynchonian sense of the "derelict" or "preterite":

> Don DeLillo has created a variety of characters confronting the same desperation, seeking 'to front only the essential facts of life' as Thoreau wished, but groping for the release in some necessarily obscure places (Oriard 5).

16 Mark Osteen has identified this "pattern of withdrawal" (450) in most of DeLillo's characters from *Americana* to *Cosmopolis*. The pattern usually includes physical isolation and the abandonment of the communicative function of language, as well as different kinds of anti-social behavior.

17 By stating that writers should move in to the margins of society, DeLillo claims the same status for them as for his characters. In *Mao II*, this pattern of withdrawal creates a sort of bouncing structure: Bill comes into society from the woods just to disappear again into anonymity by getting lost among the undifferentiated mass in the Middle East. From an ideological perspective, he will abandon his individualistic isolation to become involved in the events that will confront him with an ethical dilemma: to go back home, to his harmless burrow, or to abandon Western society as a free speech martyr.

18 The rhetorical structure underlying DeLillo's view, moreover, establishes a powerful temporal dialectics that pervades his narrative at different levels. In *Mao II*, for instance, a strong contrast is established between the past position held by writers and the present, when they have lost their privileged position in the shaping of ideologies: "Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture" (41); "The novel used to feed our search for meaning" (72); "I no longer see myself in the language" (48); "our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought" (129-130). It has been claimed that DeLillo's perception of the writer's role in society is a nostalgic one, partly related to Theodor W. Adorno's definition of "reified thought" in *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964). According to Silvia Caporale Bizzini, for instance, DeLillo expresses this nostalgic view through Bill Gray: "We can sense his nostalgia for the writer/intellectual who used to be society's conscience" (Caporale Bizzini 252). Similarly, Mark Edmundson claims DeLillo is

> in many ways nostalgic for the kind of strong self-identity whose demise he's busy chronicling [...] That nostalgia seems to me evident in the heroic pathos that DeLillo attributes to Bill, the novelist in *Mao II* (Edmundson 122).

19 I think this nostalgia for intellectuals' social commitment can be better understood as part of a wider rhetoric of nostalgia for an authentic lost world that permeates DeLillo's fiction at all levels. In *Underworld*, he takes this nostalgia to its extreme through Nick Shay's elegy for his lost youth. "I long for the days of disarray", he will openly claim near the end of the novel. The same rhetoric of nostalgia, however, can be traced in other characters' discourse. This is the case of Klara Sax, who uses her landscape art as expression of her frustration at the impossibility to escape from power structures: "Power meant something thirty, forty years ago [...], things have no limits now" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 76). Similarly, many other characters from DeLillo's novels, such as Bucky Wunderlick in *Great Jones Street*, will try to escape their present situations in search for a lost authentic state when their art was meaningful and independent.

20 In DeLillo's fiction, nostalgia needs to be understood as a textual strategy of resistance rather than the expression of mere longing for the past. The ideological nostalgia marked by the contrast between "then" and "now" points to a dialectics between the present — corrupt, fallen, overdetermined by power structures — and the past — authentic, committed, innocent — that slides over another fundamental dialectic structure: the one confronting the individual and the society he tries to escape from. This shift allows DeLillo to establish the analogy between authentic individual/innocent past and oppressive society/reified present. Through it, he is able to articulate nostalgia as the possibility to resist the system. The rhetoric of nostalgia produces in his work an effect of estrangement from the demands of the postmodern world understood as a "here and now" articulation from which the individual can gain some temporal distance.

21 From a strictly aesthetic perspective, moreover, to live in the margins would mean to reject the dominant aesthetic paradigm in search for a different one. In other words, to escape from the postmodernist aesthetic frame as it has been defined by authors such as Linda Hutcheon or Brian McHale among many others. Irony, parody, heteroglossia, anti-realism, intertextuality and metafiction are some of the recurrent terms in most definitions of postmodernist fiction. Many of them have been applied to DeLillo's work as well, but they do not constitute an adequate frame for understanding some of its distinctive features. As it has been mentioned before, Philip Nel and John N. Duvall have consistently argued that, in order to understand DeLillo's narrative in its full dimension, it should be read in connection to modernism. DeLillo's statement about his novels being "the last modernist gasp" should be reconsidered as a non-ironic one. Modernism is, according to Frank Lentricchia, the last cultural realm in which aesthetic choices were used for critical purposes, and that is precisely the stance DeLillo seems to long for:

> Impulses aesthetic and critical have — classically — stood in starkest opposition, but they go together in the modernist idea of literature, perhaps no more seamlessly than in Don DeLillo, last of the modernists, who takes for his critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation (Lentricchia 14).

22 The recurrent rhetoric of nostalgia for a lost "authentic" world, as well as the aforementioned pattern of withdrawal present in many of his novels should be considered in this light. DeLillo's aesthetic choices need to be interpreted in accordance with the consideration of a fictional model through which he can perform his self-imposed role as committed writer. From an aesthetic point of view, Philip Nel has read the modernist traces in DeLillo's fiction as part of a conscious strategy of subversion, as "small incisive shocks" threatening the postmodernist cultural logic (Nel 96).

23 From this perspective, the recurrence of motives such as the search for radical estrangement or the postlapsarian conception of reality can be read, according to Nel and Duvall, in terms of DeLillo's will to write against the postmodern system, to oppose the dominant cultural logic of late capitalism:

> DeLillo still holds out an almost modernist hope for the vocation of the contemporary writer and her or his attempt to forge the imagistic space of the novel as a counterforce to the image manipulation of capital (Duvall, "From Valparaiso" 561).

24 As Duvall has noted, DeLillo's novels stand as testimony that, in spite of postmodernism's totalizing realm, aesthetic marginality can still grant some degree of independence to artists:

> The American Marxists critic, Fredric Jameson, has suggested that multinational capital has now succeeded in appropriating the image to such an extent that all aesthetic production is nothing more than a form of commodity production. Against this totalizing sense of postmodernism, DeLillo retains some marginal hopes (Duvall, *DeLillo's Underworld* 43).

25 Through his aesthetic marginality, that is, through his deliberate attempts to relate his writing to a perception of modernism that is intrinsically identified with what Malcolm Bradbury has called "an avant-garde duty" (198), DeLillo constructs an "actively adversarial art" (Nel 113). This marginal position, moreover, grants him the distance he claimed as the requisite for writers to provide a sharp negative of reality. This image of the postmodern world only comes to light when it is shot from the margins. As François Happe has claimed in his book *La fiction contre les sistèmes*, DeLillo's novels spring from the need to be "against" what they portray: "On écrit avant tout *contre* quelque chose, proclament les textes de DeLillo, qui se veulent lieux de résistance" (Happe 8).

26 As was mentioned at the beginning, I would like to test the effectiveness of some of DeLillo's claims on *Mao II*. This novel can be considered to be his most explicit fictional attempt, to date, at dealing with the issue of the writer's commitment. In this novel, DeLillo creates a fictional *alter ego*, Bill Gray, who abandons his voluntary exile to participate in the public act in defence of another writer, the Swiss poet Jean-Claude Julien. Julien is held hostage by Maoist terrorists in Beirut, and he can be said to be the absent centre around which the plot revolves.

27 Apart from Bill Gray himself, there are other voices in the novel commenting on the writer's role in society: Charles Everson, Bill's editor and friend; George Haddad, spokesman for the terrorist group, and Brita Nilsson, photographer. The whole novel is articulated as a series of conversations between the different characters, and each of them could be identified with a basic position: Bill is the uncommitted, reclusive author; Julien, who works as UN researcher in Palestine, would represent the price some writers have to pay for their commitment; Charlie seems to symbolize the capitalist dimension of publishing; George stands for a purely ideological view of literature (as the direct product of ideological state apparatuses, in Louis Althusser's terminology); finally, Brita would assume the role of witness for historical record, as she will claim at the end of the novel. The narrative structure follows the conventions of philosophical dialogue, featuring conversations on art and ethical commitment between Bill and, successively, Brita, Charlie and George.

28 The dichotomy between two opposing roles for the writer in the margins of power structures is staged early on in the novel. It happens shortly before Brita Nilson is taken

to Bill's house in the woods, in the course of a dialogue between her and Scott Martineau, Bill's secretary and housekeeper. Brita talks about her systematic project of keeping a planetary record of photographs of writers, and establishes a distinction between those who are difficult to find because they want to keep their image private and those who are difficult to photograph because they are under arrest for ideological reasons (25). Ironically, Brita claims that she receives more help to photograph imprisoned writers: "In some cases I've received permission to photograph writers under house arrest. People are starting to know me and this helps sometimes" (25). Though both kinds of writers stand apart from society, the character traces the distinction between those who are voluntary exiles (one unavoidably thinks of Pynchon or Salinger, after whom Bill seems to be modelled, as most critics have noted) and those who are expelled to the margins of the system against their will, mainly for ideological reasons. In *Mao II*, these two positions are represented by Bill Gray and Jean-Claude Julien, escapist and committed writer, respectively.

29 The encounter between Bill and Julien is, precisely, the only one that does not take place in the text. In spite of the fact that the two writers never meet, Bill's approach to Julien constitutes the plot's backbone: from his refuge in the woods to Beirut through New York, London and Athens. The question the novel seems to posit for the reader to determine is whether Bill's trip brings him closer to Julien's position in ethical terms; in other words, whether he undergoes a shift from his uncommitted role to a politically *engagé* one. On a thematic level, this change takes place as Bill accepts to offer himself in exchange for the Swiss poet. The issue is raised by George, who tells Bill that Rashid, the terrorist chief will "want you to take the other man's place" (164). Bill's decision to participate in the exchange stands in the novel as the point at which he has to make an ethical choice: he can choose between getting on a plane and flying home or accepting the exchange and be killed by the terrorists (164). The exchange is justified in terms of Bill being more precious to the terrorists precisely because his former reclusion has turned him into a mysterious icon in the Western world. The image of the writer as a celebrity or, in this case, as anti-celebrity, has turned him into a valuable commodity on the marketplace of fundamentalism. Taking Bill Gray hostage will attract the Western world's attention to their cause:

> Gain the maximum attention. Then probably kill you ten minutes later. Then photograph your corpse and keep the picture handy for the time when it can be used more effectively (164).

30 From this perspective, it does not seem at all a coincidence that DeLillo chose to open his novel with a dialogue between the writer and the photographer in which this commodification process is commented on. The balance between overexposure and concealment is unstable for someone like Bill, who thinks that accepting to be part of the image- world implies becoming a product in the market:

> I've become someone's material. Yours, Brita. There's the life and there's the consumer event. Everything around us tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or on film (43).

31 Any form of participation in the publishing market, according to Bill, will render a writer immediately unable to resist being assimilated into power structures: "The more books they publish, the weaker we become. The secret force that drives the industry is the compulsion to make writers harmless" (47).

32 Accepting assimilation, however, turns out to be as bad a solution as refusing to become part of the system through physical reclusion. After getting involved in the Swiss poet's case, Bill will reach the conclusion that isolation was not a good strategy to keep his independence, for his secrecy turns him into an even more valuable fetish. The more a writer tries to conceal his image, Brita will claim, the more his exchange value will increase:

> People may be intrigued by this figure but they also resent him and mock him and want to dirty him up and watch his face distort in shock and fear when the concealed photographer leaps out of the trees. In a mosque, no images. In our world we sleep and eat the image and pray to it and wear it too. The writer who won't show his face is encroaching on holy turf, he's playing God's own trick (36-37).

33 *Mao II* complicates the issue of marginality as the vantage point for artistic ethics by replicating the author's position in two ways. Firstly, by questioning isolation as an effective means of escape from the system. Secondly, by creating a character that might be read as a mirror of DeLillo's own position as a writer. At the beginning of the novel, Scott visits a bookstore as a way of killing time until his meeting with Brita:

> He went to the section on modern classics and found Bill Gray's two lean novels in their latest trade editions, a matched pair banded in austere umbers and rusts (20).

34 Bill is undoubtedly part of the system, even though he has spent years in his hideaway keeping no contact with the outside world: his books are sold on the market — "He could hear them shrieking *Buy me*" (19) — and the publishing world still feeds on Bill's absence, of which he learns from the

> stacks of magazines and journals containing articles about Bill's work and about his disappearance, his concealment, his retirement, his alleged change of identity, his rumored suicide, his return to work, his work-in-progress, his death, his rumored return (31).

35 Bill and his books are part of the capitalist publishing market and of its routines as much as if Bill had never left. In fact, as noted by Brita, he is engulfed by the market as a fetishized commodity precisely because of his concealment. DeLillo seems to acknowledge the ineffectiveness of personal reclusion as a means to avoid "being incorporated." Trapped between total exposure and fetishized concealment, Bill decides to throw himself into the terrorists' arms as a final act of resistance to assimilation.

36 Through his decision to act, Bill seems to accept that his duty as a writer implies living up to the image presented to him by Charlie. The editor manages to undo the stereotype of the reclusive writer during his visit to New York:

> You're not the hermit, the woodsman-writer, you're not the crank with a native vision. You're the hunted man. You don't write political novels or books steeped into history but you still feel the clamor at your back. This is the conflict, Bill (102).

37 Unlike Thoreau, DeLillo's isolated Bill Gray does not find meaningfulness in life in the woods. As Charlie points out, Bill is rather the kind of writer who feels he is constantly being persecuted by power structures, even if his texts are apparently harmless to them. Bill's decision to abandon his retirement, therefore, can be read as the acceptance of what DeLillo considers every writer's calling to oppose any sort of power structure.

38 In this light, Bill's involvement in the Swiss poet's defense can be read as an ethical decision on his part. Through his participation in the public act in London, he can be said to confront his assimilation by the market in an alternative way: that is, by living up to DeLillo's idea that writers ought to be dangerous to every ideological system that aspires

to power. All the events in the novel, from the moment Bill comes out of his hideaway, will ironically confirm Charlie's statement about writers being persecuted around the world. Contradicting Charlie's claim that writers are not considered dangerous any longer, Bill will start to feel threatened from the instant he gets to New York; he will be the object of a terrorist attack in London and will be knocked down by a car in Athens.

39 The analysis of Bill's decision as an ethical one needs to be further qualified. According to J. Hillis Miller, a truly ethical act is one that disobeys all social rules in order to maintain the stability of social order.[7] Miller's considerations on this issue seem particularly relevant for the discussion on DeLillo's artistic ethics because they legitimize the view that a writer's responsibility is always that of standing against social order. Exemplary ethical acts are, according to Miller, "programmed by no moral or community law" (Miller, "Postmodern Ethics"). It is useful to remember DeLillo's definition of the writer as "the man or woman who automatically takes a stance against his or her government". Ethical decisions must come, according to this perspective, as the result of a unique, individual decision that "cannot be justified by any appeal to pre-existing standards" (Miller, "Postmodern Ethics"). This is precisely the case in *Mao II*. Bill's decision is not based on the consideration of pre-existing moral rules. If it constitutes an ethical act, it is precisely because he makes the decision out of his own intuition that it is the right thing to do. It is crucial to note that his choice is independent of the fact that it won't any longer be useful for the release of the Swiss poet. In Beirut, he will die of the injuries provoked after being run over in Athens, and his death, as it is usually said, will be in vain. As mentioned by Brita (235), Julien will be sold to another fundamentalist group and his fate will remain unknown to us.

40 Bill's decision to travel to Beirut in acceptance of the exchange will come after the deal has been broken and after his presence is no longer required: "Go home, Bill, and do your work. I enjoy these talks but there's no longer any reason for you to be here" (170). His choice, however, is presented in the novel as an intuitive decision having nothing to do with the rational course of action suggested by George Haddad. An ethical choice necessarily comes as a sort of revelation, not from rational consideration dictated by previously existing evidence, but from the irrational conviction of what is to be done in a particular stance (Miller *Ethics* 98). Bill's impulsive behavior has been interpreted by Maureen Whitebrook as a failure on the part of fiction to live up to its political concerns (768), but I think it might be better understood as an expression of ethics in the sense intended by J. Hillis Miller. Shortly before he is presented with the dilemma, Bill feels a strong intuition about the whole issue that seems to confirm Miller's view:

> From the beginning there was something in this situation that spoke to me directly. Beyond a poetry reading to lend aid to a fellow writer. When Charlie finished explaining, I felt a recognition. Then again in London (155).

41 Some critics have considered that Bill Gray's death must be read as a failure to fulfill his commitment (Whitebrook 768; Baker par. 13). This can be true from a strictly thematic perspective. After all, he never completes the exchange and Jean-Claude Julien is not liberated as a consequence of Bill's course of action. He gets injured and does not go to a hospital; he dies on board a ferry and is robbed of his passport and other identification documents. His self-immolation can be also read as a process of final self-erasure, through which he is finally deprived of his official identity. Only in this sense would his act be a success, for Bill finally manages to escape assimilation by the system: he truly gets to the margins of society.

42 It has been claimed that *Mao II* is an affirmation of relativism against totalitarianism (Whitebrook, Edmundson, Bull). I think this idea can be misleading from the point of view of DeLillo's understanding of his own work. Without attributing DeLillo a pre-existing political agenda, his insistence on the idea that writers should always stand in opposition to power, whatever kind of power that is, sets him apart from postmodernism's alleged anti-foundationalism. It seems to me clear from his statements and his aesthetic choices that DeLillo is not offering relativism as an answer to reification; that is, he is not accepting the postmodernist all-inclusive game as a solution to overcome social control mechanisms. Quite on the contrary, he creates a dialectical foundation for his fiction, turning it into a permanently "adversarial art," always reminding us that postmodernism's "anything goes" is not a valid ethical stance for him.

43 Bill's alleged failure should not be read as a statement of defeat on DeLillo's part. On the contrary, I would claim that it is precisely through his creation that DeLillo is able to reaffirm his commitment as a novelist. Naive as it might seem, it must be noted that he does not need to turn his character into a successful replica of himself in order to make his novel a statement of his successful ethical commitment to fiction. The "ethical moment" takes place in the act of writing itself. The thematic dramatization of the ethical choice in narrative, as J. Hillis Miller notes, constitutes the oblique allegory of the necessity to link ethics and storytelling (Miller, *Ethics* 3). Near the end of the novel, Bill provides a fundamental clue to understanding DeLillo's ethics of the novel: "A writer creates a character as a way to reveal consciousness, increase the flow of meaning" (200). This statement can be read in metanarrative key as the affirmation of DeLillo's artistic ethics. In a 1991 interview revealingly entitled "Dangerous Don DeLillo," the author talked about his character:

> I called him Bill Gray just as a provisional name [...] I used to say to friends, 'I want to change my name to Bill Gray and disappear'. I've been saying it for 10 years. But he began to fit himself into the name, and I decided to leave it (DeLillo in Passaro 38).

44 Through this transference mechanism, Bill Gray can be said to personify DeLillo's desire to escape. Most significantly, in the writing of *Mao II,* DeLillo himself becomes the ideally "dangerous" novelist he talks about. By writing about a reclusive author who tries to commit and fails, DeLillo confirms his own commitment in affirming his conviction that writing expands the limits of critical thought: "This is how we reply to power and beat back our fear. By extending the pitch of consciousness and human possibility" (200).

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NOTES

1. This idea has been discussed by Terry Eagleton (viii), Matei Calinescu (268) and Ihab Hassan (xi).

2. As is well known, the origins of this debate can be traced back to an old controversy between Irving Howe and Lesley Fiedler. The first denounced postmodernism's complicity with capitalist world markets in "Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction" (1959). The second argued in his 1965 essay "The New Mutants" that postmodernism was a revolutionary and liberating cultural movement. Defendants and detractors of postmodernism might be lined up along those two basic positions, though the consideration of each individual stance would need further specification. Detractors of postmodernism such as Howe, Habermas or Eagleton reject what they consider to be the abandonment of modernism's subversive capacity regarding bourgeois society (Eagleton 131). In opposition, Calinescu, Huyssen and Linda Hutcheon, among many others, have consistently defended the subversive nature of postmodernism.

3. The recurrence with which DeLillo's work has been described as an "anatomy" of postmodernity is truly impressive. To quote just a few examples: "His works brilliantly mimic the argots of the same cultural forms [...] that he anatomizes" (Osteen 3); "the coming attractions and dangers of postmodern culture that DeLillo anatomizes so brilliantly" (Osteen 9); "DeLillo's novels anatomize paranoia" (Edmundson 115); "une anatomie de l'Amérique contemporaine [...] d'une précision chirurgicale, ainsi que la récurrence des métaphores corporelles et pathologiques" (Happe 9); "DeLillo's post-mortem on American Cold-War paranoia" (Duvall, *DeLillo's Underworld* 11).

4. This metaphor has been recurrently used in cultural discourse, especially in connection to Modernism and Postmodernism (from Freud and Adorno to Charles Taylor and Christopher Norris).

5. It should be observed that, while the dialectics between margin and center has been widely discussed in the fields of postcolonial and feminist studies, it has rarely been considered in the same terms by critics analyzing the work of Western white male authors such as Don DeLillo. A detailed analysis of DeLillo's claims for a marginal position might benefit from the reading of fundamental theorizations of the center-margin dialectics such as Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994).

6. This public event featuring "Readings against Torture, Arbitrary Detention & Extraordinary Rendition" took place in New York City on November 8, 2005.

7. For Miller's ideas on ethical acts in fiction see *The Ethics of Reading*, 1987;"Postmodern Ethics," 2005.

ABSTRACTS

This article analyzes Don DeLillo's narrative in terms of the artistic ethics built into it in connection to the ongoing debate on whether postmodernist as a cultural movement is able to work as a tool for critique in capitalist societies. I will take *Mao II* (1991) as a representative example of the narrative pattern of a writer's resistance to the established order, a stance that is continuous throughout DeLillo's work. I will argue that the articulation of an artistic ethics within his novels replicates his often quoted statement that "the writer is the person who stands outside society, independent of affiliation and independent of influence." Moreover, I will claim that the insistence with which this artistic ethics appears in DeLillo's work can be related to the growing difficulties to classify it as postmodernist.

INDEX

Keywords: politics, Postmodernism, American literature, Ethics, Terrorism, Nostalgia., Don DeLillo, Fredric Jameson, J. Hillis Miller, Salman Rushdie, Thomas Pynchon, J.D. Salinger

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